

Becoming a Buddhist by Madawela Punnaji

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Practising Buddhism and being a Buddhist are two different things. You may not be a Buddhist but you can still practice Buddhism. On the other hand, you may be a Buddhist but not practice Buddhism. Quite different from both practising and being is becoming a Buddhist.

On the one extreme are the Westerners who experiment with Buddhist practice but do not become Buddhists. They miss the full benefit of the practice. On the other extreme are the Easterners, born in Buddhist countries and brought up in Buddhist cultures, who call themselves Buddhists but do not practise Buddhism. They get very little benefit, if any at all, from Buddhism. There is a third intermediate group of people, however, that avoids both extremes; that is, those who become Buddhists. They are the ones who really benefit from the teaching of the Buddha.

Those who call themselves Buddhists just because they have been born into a Buddhist family or because they practise some rituals, are mistaken. One does not become a Buddhist by birth, by practice, or even by initiation. One becomes a Buddhist by what one is. Buddhists by birth as well as non-Buddhists, practitioners of Buddhism or otherwise, can become Buddhists if they want to and know how. To do so, one has to understand what one is.

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Character Structure

What one is is one's character structure, which consists of one's philosophy of life, one's aim in life, what one speaks habitually, what one does habitually, and how one lives habitually. Habits are tendencies of behaviour which are perpetuated by practice; Practice means repetition. What one repeats habitually, one becomes. One repeats, however, only what one wants to be. One is what one wants to be. What one wants to be depends on one's sense of values, which in turn depends on one's philosophy of life.

An individual's character is a functional whole that is organized to reach a set goal. Every habit of thought, speech, and action is an integral part of this functional whole, which is necessary to reach this goal.

The goal, however, is always a personality. It is some self that one wants to be. To be more accurate, the goal is a visualized image of the person one wants to become.

This person one wants to become is always a person one considers to be superior in some form. One always wants to move from a state of inferiority to a state of superiority. One's goal tends to be what one perceives to be lacking in oneself. What is perceived to be superior depends on one's sense of values. These values, again, depends on one's philosophy of life.

If we want to change our habits, we can do so only by becoming a different person: by a rebirth-which means we have to change our philosophy of life. We have to change our goal in life, which will be

followed by a complete reorganizing of our thought, speech, action, and life to reach a different goal. This means, we will have a new way of thinking, a new way of feeling and a new way of speaking, acting, and living. Then old habits will be dropped and new habits will be formed. Isolated habits cannot be eliminated because they are essential parts of one's character structure organized to reach a desired goal. It is only by a character transformation that one can change one's habits. This is the reason for the many failures in attempts to overcome habits like eating, drinking, smoking, etc.

Buddhist Character Structure

Many of the above concepts are accepted by modern psychologists, especially the Adlerians and Behaviorists and in modern psycho-cybernetics. But more than twenty five centuries ago, the Unsurpassable Trainer of Personality (anuttaro purisadamma sarati), the Buddha, the Awakened One, formulated a system of transforming character based on these principles. When one examines this system carefully, one realizes that Buddhism is a system of personal growth and inner transformation. This system is called the Sublime Eightfold Way. The Sublime Eightfold Way (commonly translated as the Noble Eightfold Path) is laid down as follows:

1. Harmonious Perspective
2. Harmonious Aspiration
3. Harmonious Speech
4. Harmonious Action
5. Harmonious Lifestyle
6. Harmonious Practice
7. Harmonious Attention
8. Harmonious Equilibrium

This Sublime Eightfold Way is not a set of commandments or rules of living as some describe it. It is a description of the character structure of the true Buddhist. One has to acquire this character structure in order to become a Buddhist. A change in character is rarely a sudden change, though sometimes it could appear to be so. After a long period of struggling to understand, the harmonious perspective may dawn upon one when the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle suddenly click into place. When the harmonious perspective appears, the rest of the structure falls into place. The individual's life becomes reoriented and reorganized to reach the very special goal of inner calm called Nibbana.

Internal and External Conflicts

Harmonious Perspective is the perspective that does not create any conflict within or without. Conflict within is the conflict between our emotional impulses (asava) and our sense of good and bad associated with fear and shame (hiri-ottappa). Conflict without is the conflict between our impulses and external reality, physical and social.

These emotional impulses are basically of two kinds: those that seek pleasure (loba) and those that avoid pain (dosa). These two kinds of emotional impulses represent the positive and the negative aspects of pleasure seeking (kama-sukhallikanu-yoga). These emotional impulses are also blind and they make us blind to reality (moha). These three drive us toward the goal of pleasure and seek immediate satisfaction.

If one's pleasure-seeking emotions are powerful, one might become a criminal. If, on the other hand, one's fear and shame become powerful one tends to become inhibited and deny oneself pleasure through an ascetic lifestyle (atta-kilamatanu-yoga). If one cannot resolve the conflict one way or the other, one might become neurotic or psychotic, running away from reality into a fantasy world.

The outer conflict occurs when the search for pleasure comes in conflict with other people or the physical environment itself. We cannot always have pleasure and we cannot always avoid pain. Sometimes our enjoyment of pleasure can hurt other people. Often things don't happen as we want. Our impulses are blind and our reason comes in conflict with our impulses. The conflict between the impulses and the external environment creates frustration, anxiety, and unhappiness.

The search for pleasure also results in possessiveness or personalization; we like to own our pleasures and make them permanent. By owning or personalizing, we build and expand a 'self' and 'personality' or 'ego'. This personalization is also accompanied by a desire for the permanent existence of what we call 'ourselves' or our 'own.' We like what we personalize not to grow old or die. Youthfulness is pleasant to us, while old age is unpleasant. Health is pleasant to us, while disease is unpleasant. Life is pleasant to us, while death is unpleasant. Parting from the pleasant and meeting the unpleasant is frustrating. Not being able to have things as we want is a frustration. The cause of this suffering is undoubtedly unrealistic desire or emotional impulses which lead to personalization.

It is clear that blind impulse is the culprit. It is this blind impulse that clashes with our sense of goodness and with our reason and external reality. It is only by gaining control over this impulse that this conflict can be resolved. Some method had to be found to gain control over this impulse without creating suffering in the process.

The Value of Calmness

This all important method was discovered by the Buddha twenty-five centuries ago. This method is to unify the personality by reorganizing it to reach a harmonious goal that does not come in conflict with reality. This is to seek the new and special goal - the goal of inner calm (ajjhata santi). To achieve inner calm, one has to realize that calmness is goodness, happiness, and realism.

It should be noted that emotional excitement, which is accompanied by tension, is not a state of comfort or pleasure. It is only the release of tension, or the state of relaxation, that is pleasant. Satisfying desire is pleasant only because of the release of tension. The presence of desire, on the other hand, is unpleasant because it is accompanied by tension. It is to get rid of this discomfort of tension, and to obtain the comfort of relaxation that we seek satisfaction of desires. By reaching inner calm and relaxation, the goal of experiencing pleasure and happiness is attained without first experiencing tension.

Calm is also the way to goodness. The emotional impulse which comes in conflict with society and good principles is evil. The calming of these impulses is, therefore, goodness. This means that the aim of our sense of goodness is also achieved by seeking calm. Because the emotional impulse comes in conflict with reality, it follows that calmness gets us into harmony with reality. The aim of our rational thinking is to be in harmony with reality. Harmony with external reality, as well as the harmony with our reason, is achieved through the cultivation of inner calm.

This way, the whole personality is brought into harmony internally and externally by seeking calm. Understanding the problem of life and existence and the importance of seeking calm, is gaining harmonious perspective. When this special perspective is gained, the right sense of values is acquired. This gives a new direction to life. Then our life is reorganized to achieve a different goal. This way a personality transformation takes place; the character of the individual is changed; and mental health and happiness is achieved.

The aim of Buddhism is to transform the personality in this way. This transformation is also a process of growth. This is why Buddhism is also a growth technique. The growth takes place in four stages: devotion (saddha), discipline (sila), detachment (caga), and depersonalization (panna). When we speak of the practice of Buddhism, it is necessary to speak about these stages of growth. Each individual practices at his or her own level.

When one has acquired harmonious perspective, one has saddha. Saddha represents our sense of values. It is the appreciation of calm, which is goodness, happiness, and realism.

To appreciate is to value, to esteem, to hold in high regard or consider to be superior. When one appreciates calm, one appreciates the Buddha, the Awakened One; the Dhamma, the Experience of the Awakened One, and the Sangha, the Society of followers of the Awakened One. This triad (the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha) is called the "Triple Gem" (ratanattaya), because a "gem" represents

value. Buddhists consider this triad to be the greatest thing in the world. They also call it the "Triple Refuge" (tisarana) because it is the refuge of the Buddhist in this world of suffering.

Buddhist Devotional Practices

Devotional practices in Buddhism are exercises that develop appreciation (saddha). Buddhists do not pray to the Buddha but worship the Buddha. Prayer is adoration, confession, supplication or thanksgiving. To worship (worth + ship), on the other hand, is to show great respect, reverence, or admiration; it is to highly esteem or hold in high regard. For Buddhists, it is to recognize the greatness or superiority of the Buddha. This worship is a psychological exercise to develop saddha (appreciation), the Buddhist sense of value that gives new direction to life.

Buddhist worship is not, as some people may think, a meaningless ritual practiced by less-intellectual individuals. It can become so, however, if it is done without understanding. The purpose of Buddhist worship is to get one moving in the right direction. It is a reorientation. It is a kind of meditation or a psychological exercise. The idea is that we move in the direction of what we consider superior and worthwhile. Worship reminds us of the Buddhist sense of values -- we become what we worship.

Buddhist worship consists of bows, offerings, recitations, silent meditations, sharing of merit, and aspiration, each of which has a very important psychological meaning and purpose.

The bow, or obeisance, is an important practice which starts the initiate in the right direction. It is the recognition of the greatness of the Buddha and the admission of one's own inadequacy in comparison to the Buddha. It is saying, in effect, "Great lord, I recognize your greatness in comparison to me." This is humbling oneself before the Buddha. It makes the individual aware of his or her position on the ladder of progress. The bow, or prostration, is a conscious admission of one's inferiority to the superior position of the Buddha. It cultivates a healthy humble feeling, quite different from a morbid inferiority complex.

This recognition of one's inadequacy spurs one towards a superior state. Buddhists do not look upon themselves as sinners and helpless weaklings before a superior, all powerful, supernatural being who can never be equalled by anyone. They believe that everyone can reach the state of perfection reached by the Buddha. This exercise of bowing is only a method of programming our mind to reach the goal of perfection. It reminds us of our goal and the need to pursue it. It helps us to visualize the goal with respect and appreciation. Modern psycho-cybernetic theory, which compares the human mind to an automatic goal-seeking machine, is a very precise description of how Buddhist practice works. Buddhist worship is a kind of hero worship. If we worship those we consider to be heroes, we gradually become like them; if we worship (respect and admire) criminals, we become criminals ourselves; if we worship saints, on the other hand, we tend to become saints. The basic principle is that we become what we worship. We become the ideal we worship. Buddhists are not idol worshippers, but are ideal worshippers.

The bow is the physical expression of saddha, the mental state of reverential appreciation of the Buddha. It was William James who said, "Action seems to follow feeling, but really action and feeling go together; and by regulating the action, which is under the more direct control of the will, we can indirectly regulate the feeling, which is not." If we understand this psychological principle, we understand how the bow can help cultivate saddha within us. By acting out saddha in the bow, we produce the feeling of saddha within us. This saddha is what initiates the movement towards our goal.

All other parts of the worship, such as offerings, recitations and meditation, help cultivate saddha: The offering of light, which symbolizes wisdom, is a way of honouring the enlightenment of the Buddha. The offering of incense, which symbolizes virtue, is to honour the Buddha's virtues. Flowers represent the pleasures of the world, which are transient, their offering represents the sacrifice of worldliness in favour of the inner peace of Nibbana.

Offering food symbolizes our gratitude to the Buddha for giving us his teachings, even though what we give is not worth even a thousandth part of what Buddha gave to us.

When our lives have been reoriented through the cultivation of saddha or the reverential appreciation of the goal of perfection of human nature, our speech, action and lifestyle fall in line with this goal and our life begins to move in the direction of this goal. When this happens, we have become Buddhists. Now we see, how important it is to cultivate saddha.

The Use of Images

To place the use of images in Buddhist worship in its proper perspective, we must recognize that people use images in their lives all the time, sometimes to their disadvantage, but often to their great advantage. Even those who think they can do without images cannot help being influenced by them.

It is quite natural for human beings of all cultures to use images of various types. Why are great national monuments and statues built? Why do people pay thousands of dollars for paintings and sculpture? Why do people buy cameras? If images were not of any value, would the camera industry be so prosperous today? The Chinese say, "One picture is worth ten thousand words." Modern advertisers know this principle very well and use it to their advantage. Buddhists use Buddhist images to their advantage as well.

Buddhists are not naive enough to think that statues have life in them. They only use them as symbols. They use the image of the Buddha only as an external representation of an internal mental image. The external image enhances the internal mental image and the feeling associated with it. Statues are a kind of non-verbal language, like music, used to express certain ideas. It might be worthwhile to remember that we use verbal symbols all the time when we are speaking, writing, or even thinking.

Harmonious Behaviour

When one becomes a Buddhist, one's change in speech, action, and lifestyle is called sila. Sila is not merely self-restraint or discipline. No discipline is needed once our direction in life has been changed. We then go in that direction because we want to go. Discipline and restraint would be needed to stop us from going in that direction or to change our habits of behaviour. Even this would not be successful unless we changed our direction again.

A behaviour change imposed upon one by an external agency is called silabbata-paramasa in Buddhism. This Pali term is commonly mis-translated as "rites and rituals." However, sila means "behaviour"; bata means "vow": and paramasa means "taking as something external" (parato arnasati). So silabbata-paramasa should really be translated as "behaviour that is imposed upon one", not as "rites and rituals." If we consider the new behaviour to be something imposed on us from outside, and not something that is the natural result of our changed outlook, it would be silabbata-paramasa. Some examples of this would be: trying to stop smoking because circumstances force us to do so, or because the doctor said it must be done; trying to follow commandments or precepts for fear of punishment by a wrathful God, or because Buddha said to do so; or not drinking alcohol because the government has issued a law of prohibition against it. This externally imposed behaviour change is not the goal of Buddhists.

A Buddhist believes that all beings are basically good. "The mind, oh disciples, is naturally pure. It becomes defiled due to foreign impurities." An enlightened Buddhist would never consider himself a "sinner," thus producing a bad self-image, which would prevent him from seeking purity. He would, rather, picture himself as an inherently good and calm person who could sometimes temporarily lose his equilibrium.

Good behaviour is something positive; it is not merely refraining from bad behaviour. It means becoming interested in others. It is the ability to consider others to be as important as oneself. It is being able to share things with others and care for others. It is treating others as a mother would treat her beloved children. It is including others in one's interest, without excluding any individual because he or she is "bad." It is being able to forgive other's faults. It is being able to treat everyone equally. Good behaviour, in Buddhism, is based on a good state of mind. Therefore it is necessary to cultivate a good mind, which is a calm mind. This is how meditation comes into Buddhism. Meditation becomes

a natural thing when your mind is oriented towards the goal of calmness. Calmness is not opposed to interest in others. It is the calm mind that can become interested in others. The mind that is not calm is self-absorbed and not able to become interested in others. Selfless love is not emotional excitement, as some people think it is. All emotions are self-centred. Selflessness cannot therefore be an emotion. It can only be seen as the state of calm. This is why the cultivation of calm in meditation cannot make a person apathetic. Calmness can only result in empathy, the ability to enter into another person's feelings as if they were one's own. This is what makes a person good.

Calmness is not only selfless concern for others, it is also detachment. Attachment is self-centered, and is an emotion. This attachment is what many people call love. This kind of love disappears in calmness, but this is not something to be worried about. Attachment is, actually, what prevents selfless love. If we become attached to a person or thing, we tend to be protective and possessive, and thus become antagonistic towards others. Therefore, detachment and selflessness go together. In order to develop selfless love, we have to give up selfishness and attachment. This is the meaning of renunciation in Buddhism.

Renunciation and selfless concern for others brings about happiness. Unhappiness is due to a concern with oneself and one's needs. By giving up self-concerns, one becomes happy. This calmness and stability of mind is what is called samadhi (equilibrium).

Depersonalization

The final stage in the development of the path of Buddhism is depersonalization. This is when we are able to give up what has been personalized by seeing that there is nothing that we can call our own. When we see that all things are unstable (anicca), anxiety-producing (dukkha), and impersonal (anatta), we are free of all suffering. This is because there are no possessions or "self" to worry about. This depersonalization is what makes an individual completely selfless. When this happens one can even face death without anxiety. This complete freedom from anxiety is the aim of Buddhism.

References

- <http://www.protobuddhism.com/joomla/>

Category:

- [Introduction to Buddhism](#)